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## FAMILY LAW

### Child support suffers as economy struggles

More than a million Texas kids caught in squeeze

By **EMILY RAMSHAW**  
Austin Bureau  
eramshaw@dallasnews.com

**AUSTIN** — The faltering national economy is taking its toll on Texas kids.

More parents are making their child support payments from unemployment checks and asking judges to lower their financial burdens.

Those who managed fine for years without that kind of assistance are fighting for it to make ends meet. Caseloads are going up in Dallas and other North Texas counties.

**Jobless, with children**  
Texas child support collected from unemployment checks:

May 2008:  
**\$2.5 million**

May 2009:  
**\$11.5 million**



SOURCE: Texas attorney general's child support division

Staff graphic

And more than a million children are caught in the squeeze.

"It's definitely a reflection of the economy. We're getting more requests to enforce orders, and we're

See **CHILD** Page 14A

## AFGHANISTAN

### Marines embark on new offensive

Troops' dual focus will be to protect civilians from Taliban, restore government services

FROM WIRE REPORTS

**CAMP LEATHERNECK, Afghanistan** — Thousands of U.S. Marines descended upon the volatile Helmand River valley in helicopters and armored convoys early today, mounting the first large-scale test of the U.S. military's new counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan.

The operation will involve 4,000 troops from the 2nd Marine Expedition-

ary Brigade, which was dispatched to Afghanistan earlier this year by President Barack Obama to combat a growing Taliban insurgency in Helmand and other southern provinces.

Officers said the mission, which required months of planning, is the Marines' largest operation since the 2004 invasion of Fallujah, Iraq.

The Marines, along with an Army brigade that is scheduled to arrive later this summer, plan to push into pockets of the country where NATO forces have not had a presence.

See **MARINES** Page 12A

**TRO**  
Local pulls plan to rename street  
Controversial proposal to name downtown as 'Young Street for Mayor' leader César Chávez withdrawn. 1B

**ITUARY**  
Car winner  
1 Malden dies

Karl Malden, the Academy Award-winning actor whose intelligent characterizations on stage and screen made a star, has died at 97. 10n B

**AS**  
Incumbent gets confidence vote  
Texas A&M University faculty gave system Chancellor Mike McKinney confidence vote weeks after the election of the university president. 3A

**ION**  
Jackson burial leverland Ranch  
Plan to bury Michael Jackson at his sprawling Irland Ranch fizzled, legal details about his final resting place undecided. 5A

## LEGISLATURE '09 | SPECIAL SESSION

### Toll-road bill hits speed bump



## DALLAS | CITY HALL CORRUPTION TRIAL

### Tapes recap dealings

Hill associate describes how ex-mayor pro tem accepted apparent bribe

# Child support suffers as U.S. economy slides

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seeing more people apply for our services — parents who didn't seek it before, said Janee Rolfe, spokeswoman for the Texas attorney general's child support division.

"Children need child support more than ever when the economy is failing," she said.

Unlike some states, Texas' child support collections continue to grow despite the down economy.

Officials say that's because they've been aggressive, but the dismal economy still has hindered their progress.

In the last year, the amount of child support Texas collected from unemployment checks more than quadrupled. It's jumped 360 percent, to \$11.5 million in May from \$2.5 million in that month a year ago.

The number of child support-paying parents being hired for new jobs dropped by 26 percent in the same time period. And Texas is collecting slightly more money per month than it was last year — well below its projections.

The pinch is nationwide.

In a recent survey of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, almost 40 percent of divorce attorneys reported a jump in modifications being made to child support payments.

Last year at this time, roughly 140,000 families had active child support cases across Dallas, Collin, Denton, Ellis and Rockwall counties; this year, it's close to 150,000.

While state officials don't keep records on the number of parents asking for modifications — either to cut back on child support payments or to seek more money from non-custodial parents — anecdotally, they say these requests are way up, too.

Since Patrick Crouse's 22-year real estate career tanked with the housing market, the Keller dad has watched his six-figure salary plummet. That forced him to ask judges to reduce his child support payments and to take money from his unemployment checks.

His child support payments, once \$1,500 a month, are now down to \$605 — still more than he said he can afford



AMANDA LUCIER/Staff Photographer

"A kiddo's expenses don't go away just because the economy is tight," says Michelle May O'Neil, a family law attorney. She said that she's seen an increase in child support-paying parents who have either lost their jobs or had their hours reduced and that judges are giving these parents temporary relief.

in his current \$11-per-hour job operating a forklift.

"I'm not a deadbeat dad. I feed them, nurture them, take them to church. I pay for piano lessons, braces, sports team registration," said Crouse, 49, who has joint custody of his two young children.

"But with these payments, I'm fighting to pay my electric bill, my water, my phone. I'm fighting to buy bread and milk."

Michelle May O'Neil, a family law attorney with clients in Dallas and Collin counties, said Crouse's case is common. She's seen a steady uptick in child

support-paying parents who have either lost their jobs or had their hours reduced.

O'Neil said family court judges, who traditionally have issued permanent rulings, are giving these financially strapped parents temporary relief instead.

If someone is unemployed, she said, a judge generally will temporarily reduce child support, and then call a review hearing a few months later.

"A kiddo's expenses don't go away just because the economy is tight," O'Neil said. "Judges are giving people a Band-Aid so they can find another job."

## Change in child support

Factors that affect child support in Texas:

	May 2008	May 2009	Change
Texas child support-paying parents hired at new jobs	380,000	280,000	↓ -26%
Child support payments collected in Texas	\$235 million	\$255 million	↑ 8.5%
Families with open child support cases in Texas	1 million	1.1 million	↑ 10%
Families with open child support cases in North Texas*	140,000	150,000	↑ 7%

\*Includes Dallas, Collin, Denton, Ellis, Rockwall, Kaufman, Navarro and Cook counties  
SOURCE: Texas attorney general's child support division KYLE ALCOTT/Staff Artist

# Tapes recap interactions among defendants, informant

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ill played for jurors, Reagan rags to co-defendant and former Dallas Plan Commissioner Angelo Lee about strong-arming Fisher:

"He's nervous, big time. I don't cut him no slack. Don is killing his thing off the agenda tomorrow. We'll have some one to work out the kinks."

Lee responded, "When you

## AT A GLANCE The day in court

**THE CASE:** Former Mayor Pro Tem Don Hill, his appointee to the city plan commission, D'Angelo Lee; and a web of associates are accused of funneling hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes from low-income housing developers in exchange for political support for their projects.

**HIGHLIGHT:** The prosecution played jurors more wiretap evidence that appeared to show Hill getting updates from Lee and another co-defendant on the progress of the alleged extortion scheme.

**WHAT'S NEXT:** The defense may cross-examine FBI Special Agent Allen Wilson, who has walked jurors through hours of wiretaps and recordings.

Fisher later tells an associate of Lee that if it will get people to be explicit, they could all "meet in a sauna," or "go to the swimming pool in our skivvies" to make everyone more comfortable that he was not wearing a wire.

Jurors also heard tapes of Reagan poking fun at Fisher's insistence that everyone be explicit in their demands of him

votes.

"I'm not going to call no names, but we all got to get comfortable," Reagan tells an associate in an intercepted phone call. "And that's all inclusive. ... Unless we're all comfortable, it ain't gonna pass."

So far, six people have pleaded guilty in the case. Five are on trial now. The case is ex-